

The Envoy: An Independent Art-Form in the Medieval Lyrics

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ABSTRACT. In the fourteenth century the envoy, which is a short stanza addressed to the patron to whom a poem is dedicated, became an essential part of the metrical structure of the medieval ballade. This stanza eventually emerged as an independent art-form and was classified as occasional poetry since it usually dispatched a messenger, a rose or a heart, to a lady to deliver a love letter accompanied by a gift or an emblem. The contributions of the French poet Charles d' Orleans, John Skelton, Humphrey Newton and other anonymous poets enriched the form with qualities of elegance and eloquence.

An "envoy" is a short stanza which concludes a poem written in certain metrical forms. The word is derived from the French "envoi" which indicates "the action of sending forth a poem"¹ addressed to the patron to whom it is dedicated. At the close of the thirteenth century the envoy became a regular feature of the form of the ballades composed in the puy. In France, the puy used to refer to the platform on which the officials of a concourse sat, and in the course of poetical contests poems that were composed for presentation in the puy almost inevitably contained a conventional address for patrons. The envoy, which had been a common feature of several kinds of songs, was added to the structure of the ballade in the puy, and that new feature served the purpose of dedication since judges, and other nobles were addressed by name in its first line. At a place called Aaras in France "the president of the association was called 'Prince,' and to him, as representing the whole corporation, the envoys of the poems, composed before and after the vogue of the ballade, were frequently addressed."² Thus, in the fourteenth century, a ballade, whether

composed in a puy or not, contained an envoy as an essential concluding part in its fixed structure, and the envoy was traditionally half the length of the other stanzas.

But in the fifteenth century the envoy began to emerge as an independent art form which produced a group of highly entertaining and cleverly composed poems whose limited number, I think, prevented their achieving the status of a separate genre of literature. Instead, they were categorized as occasional poetry. It is true that these poems defy any attempt at classification since they range from the folk song to the purely literary, almost courtly, composition, and the patterns of the stanzas differ considerably in their division. Although no regular formula is applied, the sense of sameness is inescapable, since they are all love letters presented to ladies as expressions of devotions, and some may have been given with gifts or emblems. These love letters differ from the usual epistolary style in the sense that they address the lady not directly but through a dispatched messenger. Beginning with the word "go," they shift from the customary spring-prelude opening in the courtly love poems, but their indebtedness to the tradition itself is obvious. They are mainly love poems in which the general tone is that of the lovers parted from their ladies, who are sometimes unkind, and they sing of the pains and yearnings of love in letters to be laid at the feet of the worshipped ladies. Thus, sung upon the immortal theme of love, the envoy appears to be a verse cast in the conventional poetic molds of the Middle Ages with some external features added. In the envoy, though, the poet seems to ignore the conventional catalogue of the beauties of the loved one, and the absence of the celebration of her virtues indicates that the lady is not an idealization of the poet's mind, a perfect being held in high reverence; she rather emerges from the traditional cadre as a direct creature of flesh and blood. It is clear that the envoy, too, takes the fashionable notion of a lover humbly and reverently aspiring to an exalted beloved, but that love service does not convey a sense of the poet's inadequacy to achieve some sort of dignity. Rather, what we actually hear is the passionate throbbing of a human heart. And whereas the use of direct speech can give the impression of an outburst of unbearable emotion, the envoy serves to relax the seriousness and strain of passion and celebrates an exquisite, refined, and ennobling love with a simplicity and spontaneity polished to attain a high degree of artistic expressiveness.

The devotion to the Virgin Mother is often indistinguishable in form from that which the knight lavishes on the mortal lady because the ideas and phraseology of the secular and amorous lyrics were borrowed for the service of the church to take the place of the vain and wordly songs of the people. The drawing of certain hymns to the Virgin on the models of the amour courtois has been brought about by the cult of the Blessed Virgin Mary, which spread with great rapidity and was already supreme by the eleventh century and remained popular until the end of the Middle Ages.

The delight in praising the Virgin's beauty and the intense joy in the duty of loving and serving her were familiar aspects of the ballads addressed to Mary, who is the paramount innocent maiden of the Christian tradition, and consequently the object of the meditator's passionate contemplation. In the envoy too we can trace that distinct influence of the contemporary amatory verse on the pious forms of religious

poetry where Mary is addressed in the language of secular poets. The Poem "Trusty Messenger I Thee Sende"³ is a prayer sent in a "little bill" to praise the Virgin with all the tenderness and affection of a courtly lover at the service of an ordinary woman. Even in this poem the reference to Mary is vague though the poet calls his lady, in the second stanza, the "lily of redolence," "the rose of confidence," and later, "that flower of price," and "the fairest paramour" which are the most common names associated with Mary in religious poetry. But the praise in epithets of excellence and the resonance of that woman's peerlessness make us begin to suspect the nature of her unique moral perfection and supremacy over other women. The poet's remark that she is a mystery with a "nature inexplicable," and "grace incomparable" combines with his use of superlatives to deepen our uncertainty. But the resolution of that ambiguity is simply stated at the end of the fourth stanza: "Most souveraine Mediatrice." In this light, the possibility for doubt vanishes, and the fourth line of the fifth stanza: "Sith she is only withouten vice" can then be interpreted as a direct allusion to the Immaculate Conception whose miraculous quality makes Mary's virgin state "inexplicable." Thus the image of the Virgin as a creature half mortal, half divine is freshly conceived and conveyed by means of an exceptionally skillful form. The poet's choice of the envoy is suitable to his purpose of begging Mary's intercession, since the form was traditionally used in supplication for patronage.

The possibility for ambiguity is inherent, also, in John Skelton's "Disconsolate Love" which uses such words as "suffer" and "endure" to describe the pains of his love. But the ambiguity intensifies in the line "one there is, and ever one shall be," stressing the singularity of his lady, and particularly in the image in the second line of a "persed [heart] with pain, bleding with wondes smart," parallel to the wounds of Christ on the cross. This metaphor appears frequently in the religious poems making use of the Cupid's bow image, which is in itself an adaptation of secular models taken from the convention of courtly love. What distinguishes John Skelton's lady from the virgin is the fact that he "dare not discure" in order to keep her identity secret from the world. John Skelton also dispatches his heart, but rather than serving his lady, the heart's wounds should convince her of his unbearable pains. In this poem we feel we are back in the actual world of the "game of courtship" with a languishing suitor who is imploring the hardhearted lady for pity. To avoid upsetting his woman, the poet, instead of complaining directly about her caprices and disdain, says:

"Bewaile thy fortune with vaines wan and blo,
O! Fortune, unfrendly, fortune, unkind thou art!
To be so cruel and so overthwart."

So, in this one-stanza poem, the means of poetic expression is highly conventional, and the recurrence of the one-line refrain, "That where I love best I dare not discure," magnifies the basic impulse behind this envoy.

As the envoy derived most of its inspiration from France, it is interesting to find that one of the prominent contributors to the genre is Charles d'Orleans, an eminent French poet taken prisoner by the English at Agincourt in 1415 to 1440. From his work composed in English is the quatrain rondeau "The Service of His Mistress."

The form of the rondeau has its roots in the primitive past of the French folk dance, where it was meant to be sung to a round dance. Charles adapted this form to his envoy, which begins with a two-line refrain that is repeated after each of two four-line stanzas. The dispatched messenger is the poet's "herte" sent forth with utter humility to serve his lady, whose modesty and dignity are preserved by his appeal for her pity and mercy:

"Go forth, myn herte, wyth my lady;
 Loke that thou spare no bisynesse
 To serve hire wyth swich lowlynesse
 That thou gete hir grace and mercy."

That tone of utter humility and Charles's use of words like "lady," "grace," "mercy," and "preye" cause a blurring of the distinction between secular and sacred relationships with the beloved. The woman addressed in this rondeau may be the virgin, since the use of secular patterns in the religious lyrics was a characteristic feature of the religious ones. At the time of the overwhelming impact of the tradition of courtly love, it was natural to find its traces in all the contemporary literature. More interesting is the fact that many of the conventional secular phrases were kept in the religious poems without changes, so that a man would ask for God's mercy in words identical with those of the lover longing for his mistress's favours. But the line in which Charles says: "that she kepe trewely hir promesse" suggests that lady's imperfect mutability, which is a characteristic of earthly love, inappropriate to be attributed to Mary.

The heart is sent once more in a short poem to move and persuade the lady. This anonymous piece consists of one five-line stanza of which the last two lines form the final message to be delivered to the lady as it is:

"And say hire this, as I seye thee:
 Farewel my joye, and welcome peyne.
 Till I see my Lady ageyn."

The shortness of the poem gains it a clarity, precision, and concise forcefulness that makes it move with genuine lightness, a feature associated with popular love lyrics. This gay, joyous movement fills the senses with the freshness of folk song with its simplicity and directness, and it reflects the manners and sentiments of the folk. "Some of the most beautiful dance groups are popular not only in the sense that they could be performed and enjoyed irrespective of learning or class, but in that they perpetuate beliefs and fantasies of the people which are older than and essentially independent of clerical and aristocratic tradition."⁴ Despite the fact that obscenity in itself cannot be taken as a criterion for distinguishing the *chanson populaire* from the *chanson courtois*, still one cannot help noticing the sly display of sexual symbolism in the songs fashioned by the folk. The short poem "On A Present of A Ring" is another expression of the jollity and spontaneous charm of folk poetry which springs from the untrained imagination of the common people. The messenger in this one five-line stanza is a ring that is sent to convey the poet's message in ritual performance :

"And loke thou knele down at hir feet.
 Bisechyng hire she wolde not desdeyne."

The ring sent as a token of love has a sexual connotation because it simply suggests a perfect circle of the relationship, and in the last line in particular, the poet urges an adulterous meeting. With the ring resting finally on the lady's "smale fynghes," the implication of the consummation of love between the poet and his lady becomes very clear as the ring says "My maister wolde that he were I." This implicit sexual association shows the simple unaffectedness of the love of the folk which is a characteristic feature of the popular song. Such a sensuous and unabashed temper would be quite inappropriate to the conventions of courtly poetry.

Humphrey Newton departs from the usual custom of following the fixed French form in an epistle to his lady titled "Sho se me in a kirk on a Friday in a mornynge." What is remarkable here is not the evocation of the lover's state of feeling, but the suggesting of a vivid background of events, which lends concreteness and dramatic power to the envoy. The dramatic context of this verse is that of the speaker recounting his romantic adventure in an episode which he makes visually real. Here the speaker is sharply characterized, not as a figure of the lover in general, but as a particular person whose intense experience unconsciously portrays a considerable part of his personality. Undoubtedly, this treatment invests the genre with an entirely new quality of elegance, but the question rises here as to the relationship between the "little bill" and the narration of the rich dramatic incident with its whimsical detail. It seems strange that the poet is asking for a rendezvous that has already been granted, and it is made clear that the meeting in the church has already taken place since the poet uses the past tense in recounting his adventure. But the relationship may be clarified by the suggestion that Newton's eleven couplet poem is a blend of fantasy and realism that describes an interesting dramatic situation which has taken place only in the lover's mind. Social pressures, personal frustrations, and fears of malicious gossip have often kept lovers apart, and as a result of that forced distance between them the poet is often with his beloved in his thoughts or his waking dreams. It is still difficult to follow the dream-like transition between the lady's imagined and real presence, especially at moments when the dream is crossed by a flicker of humor suggesting the lady's feigning and in heart already approving :

"And fast they did pitter--patter--
I hope they said matins togeder."

So by creating such an interesting dramatic situation, the poet turns from the usual method of treatment in courtly poems and deliberately follows an original structural pattern which he uses most skillfully to achieve a cumulative effect. The elaborate and easy flow of the stanza and the combination of simple and sophisticated expressions show the poet's self-conscious attempt to write in a polished and distinguished manner.

By examining thoroughly this representative selection of envoys, one can conclude that not one of them can be set as a single archetype of the genre. They vary in their style, structure, stanzaic division, rhyme scheme, and even in the treatment of the dominant theme of love. The poet may imitate the mannerisms of the troubadours or transform their poetic forms for the religious purposes of the church. Sometimes he

reflects the attitudes of the aristocrats at court or expresses the sentiments of the folk. Other times he complains about the pangs of separation or celebrates a furtive meeting. What is constant at all times is the dispatched messenger sent forth to deliver generally short poems that display genuinely artistic organic regularity as well as impressively passionate eloquence. The envoy, therefore, has gained a great freedom of arrangement by this wide variety, enabling the poet to maintain a personal utterance which distinguishes the genre from poetry that expresses public sentiment.

Endnotes

- (1) This quotation is taken from the definition of "envoy" as given in the O.E.D.
- (2) **Helen Louise Cohen**, *Lyrics Forms From France*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1922), 11.
- (3) **R.T. Davies**, Ed. *Medieval English Lyrics*, (Northwestern University Press, 1963), 201. All poems references are to this anthology and to: *Rossell Hope Robins*, Ed., *Secular Lyrics of the XVth Centuries*, (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1950).
- (4) **Peter Dronke**, *The Medieval Lyrics*, (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1968), 194.

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المرسول الشعري في قصائد العصور الوسطى

لمياء محمد صالح باعشن

أستاذ مساعد - قسم اللغات الأوروبية وآدابها - كلية الآداب والعلوم الإنسانية
جامعة الملك عبد العزيز - جدة

في القرن السابع عشر الميلادي أصبحت الرسالة الشعرية ، والتي تتكون من مقطع قصير موجه إلى النصير الموالي للشاعر والذي تهدي إليه القصيدة ، جزءاً هاماً من التركيبية القياسية الوزنية لقصائد العصور الوسطى . ثم بدأ هذا المقطع في الظهور كتركيبة فنية منفصلة قائمة بذاتها ، وأدرجت في نوعها مع شعر المناسبات ، إذ إنها غالباً ماتبعث رسولاً ، كوردة أو قلب الشاعر إلى سيدة ما ، ليلغها رسالة حب تصحبها هدية أو رمز للمحبة .

هذا ، وتعتبر مشاركات الشاعر الفرنسي «شارل دورليان» والشعراء «جون سكلتون» و «هيمفري نيوتن» وغيرهم من الشعراء مجهولي الهوية إثراء لهذه الصيغة الفنية الهامة التي أضافت إليها بلاغة ورفقاً .